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### **The Treasure of Lake Guatavita**

In the 19th century, although the city of El Dorado was widely thought to be a chimera,<sup>2</sup> people from around the world, driven by visions of riches, began to plunder South America again. Some of the original Spanish explorers had determined that part of the El Dorado myth was based on the Muisca practice of sacrificing gold and jewels by dumping them into Lake Guatavita, a perfectly round lake high in the mountains of Colombia. As early as 1562, repeated attempts had been made to drain the lake and uncover the Muisca treasure. Although some gold and jewels were found, it was never enough to offset the costs of draining the lake.

In 1904, a group of entrepreneurs used steam pumps to empty the lake, only to find a few small trinkets. The following spring, the lake was full again, and treasure-hunters remained convinced that Guatavita held a fortune at its center. Several more lake-dredging expeditions were conducted, using everything from deep-sea divers to metal detectors to suction pumps in order to find the precious gold. Finally, in 1965, the Colombian government restricted excavation of Lake Guatavita to archaeologists, and the plundering came to an end.

### **Paradise Found**

The "real" El Dorado was never found, but its namesake can be found everywhere on U.S. maps. There is an "El Dorado" or "Eldorado" in Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. There is an "Eldorado Springs" in both Missouri and Colorado. Hardly a grain of gold was mined in most of these places, but the legend of El Dorado symbolizes the attainment of ultimate fortune. It is easy to see why pioneer settlers chose to name their towns after the mythical kingdom of "the golden man."

<sup>2</sup> **chimera** (ki MARE uh): an illusion or fabrication of the mind; an unrealizable dream